Unheard Words & Unseen Visions

~~THE RARE WORD OF GOD~~

I Sam 3:1 10
July 10, 1966 Dyer

July 17, 1966 - Beverly Aug. 1966 - Alton Aug 22, 1967 Col. Park Vespers

The charming story of the young boy Samuel is one that every school boy knows", to use the old cliche. Elkanah had two wives, one of whom had borne him children - and Hannah, the other who was barren. Hannah prayed for a son, and when her prayer was granted she gratefully and dutifully took him to the priest Eli, to serve in the house of the Lord. It was there, that Samuel was called by God, in a nocturnal exchange that has long been a favorite Sunday School story.

But, like many other O.T. stories which are taken out of context and told and retold in our S.S.classes, the story of Samuel has almost no meaning to the adult Chirstian. It is no more than a pious fairy tale, which will teach our children something and if not this, it will at least fascinate and entertain them-as any tale about strange voices in the dark will do. ~~It falls in the adult mind into the same category as Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White.~~

What would you do if your child came to you in the middle of the night saying that he had heard a voice calling him? I don't know about you but I'd be inclined to react in the same way as Eli did. perhaps more vehemently, thinking that he had been watching too much television, ~~or hearing too many Samuel stories.~~ There is something here that offends our common sense. We're not at all enamored with the whole conceptof a God who confronts men personzlly, who speaks to men and calls them to certain tasks, and we are down right embarrassed by the thought of a mystical, emotion ladden experience with God. ~~This is not, in one sense, a harmful skepticism, because we know that for every one authentic religious experience there are 999 that are simply the end result of a carefully planned psychological onslaught at the hands of a clever evangelist. This is not what bothers me, I'm as skeptical as anyone.~~

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assault on the emotions

There are several reasons for our skepticism, however: simple logic tells us that voices in the dark are probably an illusion, a dream, a figment of the imagination or a remnant of the superstitous days of old. But beyond this you and I have reacted against the very popular type of religion that makes an emotional, religious experience its focal emphasis. We have reacted against the type of evangelism which uses all the techniques of group manipulation and personal persuaion. We know that for every one authentic religious experience there are 999 that are merely the result of a carefully plotted, pschological assault on the emotions.

We know that, given the proper conditions the minds can enable us to do many exceptional things. We know that a football player can be made to beleive his arm doesn't hurt, even though it was broken in the last play. We know, because we have seen thousands of men, made to beleive that thiers was a master race, and that thier father land was destined to rule the world. We know that given the proper setting, dim lights, soft music, the urgent description of the pain and torture of hell, cleverly contrasted with the bliss of heaven, almost any man can be made to have what he thinks is a religoous experience. And so we back away.

This is not what bothers me. I'm as skeptical as anyone.

that the use of LSD is a sure way to have a religios experience. A seminary professor who took the drug states that he had a vision like Moses' experience with the burning bush.

Years ago Wm. James discoverd that certain drugs did induce mystical religious experiences. He recorded in his book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" his own reactions, "The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into a unity." (see lectures K & 17)

The disturbing aspect of LSD, however, is that for a growing number of people it seems to be filling a definite need. By creating pseudo-religious experience the drug has introduced men to a level of existence about which they knew nothing and yet which they feel they have always needed. That is, we have lost track with this whole realm of experiences to such a degree that in our generation it has become necessary to induce them by means of a drug.

Now, furthest from my mind at this point is any desire to see the Presby. Church turn to mysticism or psychologically induced feelings of conversion. I remain a sketptic. But I do think we very badly need to open ourselves to the possibility thatGod does communicate with men and with groups of men. This we have lost-and this, it seems to me, we dwsparately need to recover.

Along these lines let me make three observations. First, let's sssume that the reason we haven't had any first hand experience with a communicative God is that he has stopped talking. This, you will remember, is one of the ways the statment from I Samuel can be understood. If this is the case, I would direct your attention to a provocative article in the recent issue of Presby. Life, by David Reed, pastor of NYC's Madison Ave. Presby. Church. The article is entitled: "Why Sleepest Thou O Lord," and in it Mr. Reed suggests that is is appropriate for the believer to ask and even complain to God to make himself known. He points

We have discovered that cows produse more and better milkto the continuous strains of the Melochrino Strings: and that clerks will likewisedø/ø do betteer work if music is piped into the office. We are more at ease in the Dentist's chair, the Doctor's office, we will buy more in the depaatment store and enjoy our meal more in the restaurant, if the atmosphere is filled with some kind of music, or better siad some kind of background noise - because we don't really listen to it and its only function is to elliminate the uncomfortable silence. We just don't like silence. And Why? Becasue in silence A man can't help but think and reflect? Because solitude is essentially dangerous - in that thinking has to occur, and thinking leads to self examination and self examination leads to guilt which in turn leads to anxiety? A philosopher has propsed that a man cannnot spend ten minutes alone, in absolute silence without thinking about God. But you and I, caught in an obsession with noise, may never have the opportunity to test the validity of that thesis.
Perhaps we don't know much about a God who speaks to his people because we have lost the ability to listen.

Elijah looked for God in the fire and wind and earthquake: but God came to Elijah after the storm, after the noise - and spoke to him in the "still, small voise of calm".

Observation number three then, is that we may be listending and lookigg for God in the wrong places. Like Elijah we expect God to come dramatically we expect the heavens to open and a voice to thunderously address us: We assume that an experience with God must be traumatic, full of emotion and unmistakable. But perhaps God speaks to us guietly, inconspicuously. Perhaps he speaks to us through the words of another person, perhaps even a minister. Perhaps God communicates with us in moments of deep human feeling - joy or wonder or love or grief. Perhaps we look in the wrong places.

In the Risen Jesus Christ we have been told that it is God's world: the superficial difference between the sacred and secular is no more: The whole wide world is the theater of God's activity and the vehicle of his speaking.

Can we hear him? Do we know him? If not, is it because he has stopped speaking, or have we stopped listening?

In one of the traditional funeral prayers in the Book of Common Worship there is a phrase that leaps off the page every time I read it. It is a prayer for God's presence in a time of bereavement , but it might well aplly to the rest of life. It sums up what I have been trying to say: " Grant us, we beseech thee, the comfort of thy presence, and the ministry of thy Holy Spirit. . . Help us to walk amid the things of this world with eyes open to the beauty and glory of the eternal".

If the word of the Lord is rare in these days: if there are no frquent visions in these lives, perhaps it is because we have not learned to walk with eyes open to the beauty of the eternal . May this, then, become our prayer: that God will help us so to walk - so to live - awake, alive, alert, sensitive to his acting and to his speaking, in the world and within our lives.

Amen